

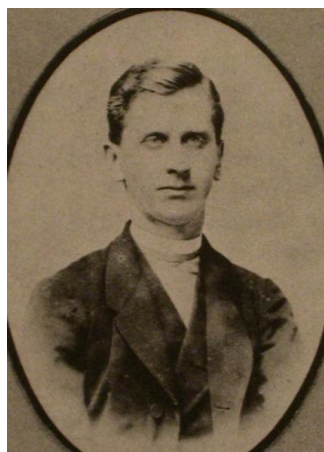
THE *STEFANO* SHIPWRECK OF 1875: AN INTRODUCTION

Josko Petkovic

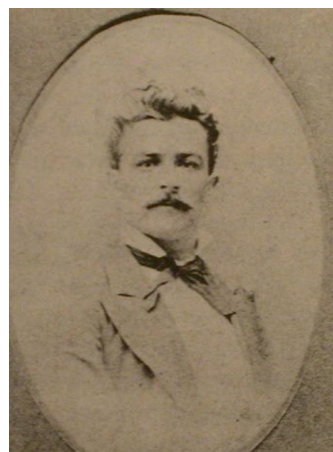
Towards the end of October 1875 the Austro-Hungarian barque *Stefano* was nearing the Australian coast on its way from Cardiff to Hong Kong with a cargo of black coal. Its 17 strong crew was made up mostly of Dalmatian-Croatian young men and boys – the oldest was the captain who was 26.



Cadet Miho Baccich
1875, aged 16.



Captain Miloslavich
1875, age 26.



Second Captain Costa,
1875, age 24.

(Photos: Courtesy Gustave Rathe)

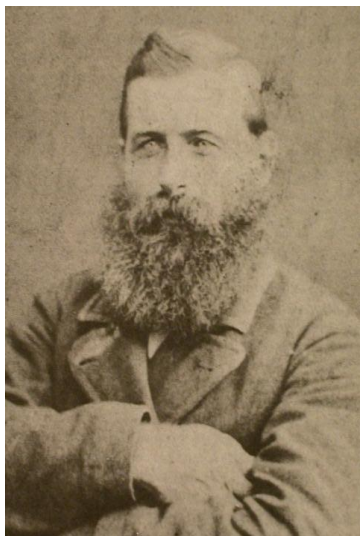
On 27 October 1875, the *Stefano* ran aground on a coral reef off the North West coast of Australia and of its crew only ten made it safely to the shore. In an attempt to locate means of sustenance, these unfortunate castaways took to wandering along the arid and desolate coastline, all the while fearing attacks from cannibals. Not surprisingly, they were not all that good at finding food or water in an unfamiliar semi-desert Australian landscape. Gradually all of them grew weaker.



(Map: Courtesy Gustave Rathe)

On Christmas Day they were hit by a fierce cyclone. Weakened further by the storm, they began to die, one by one, and in the last week of January only two shipwrecked mariners, Michael (“Miho”) Baccich, 16, and Ivan Jurich, 20, were still alive. They were in desperate condition. Facing a most certain death, and probably mad with hunger and privation they began to devour one of their dead comrades. It was at this point that the black “cannibals” they feared came to their rescue.

So begins what is, arguably, the most poignant story ever written about indigenous Australians. For the next three months the two castaways were nursed to health by two North West tribes who led them, in time, to the tip of the North West Cape where they were discovered and picked up, on 18 April 1876, by Captain Charles Tuckey of Mandurah in his pearling cutter *Jessie*.



Captain Charles Tuckey
Aged about 30

(Photo: Courtesy Gustave Rathe)

The arrival of the two sailors at Fremantle, some six months after the shipwreck of the *Stefano*, caused considerable excitement in Western Australia.

Their plight was reported in local newspapers and dramatized on stage during fundraising events.¹ The goodwill towards their indigenous benefactors was apparently contagious and subsequently the two survivors were asked by the colonial government to take gifts to the tribes which had helped them stay alive.² It is easy to imagine this happy reunion. It is even possible to imagine how different the troubled relationship between Europeans and indigenous Australians could have been.

The events of this story would probably have been lost to history were it not for the fact that they were recorded in considerable detail in a manuscript form some 276 handwritten pages. The manuscript was completed towards the end of 1876 in Miho’s home town of Dubrovnik, with the assistance of the local priest, Canon Stjepan Skurla. By all accounts Skurla was a family friend and was aged about 30 commissioned by Miho’s parents to assist their son with the task of recording his story. A votive painting of the rescue scene was also commissioned from the highly regarded maritime painter Ivankovic and donated to the Church of Our Lady of Mercy, Dubrovnik, as was the custom of the day.



(The original painting by Ivankovic – Church of Our Lady of Mercy Museum, Dubrovnik)

The Rescue Scene with the Cutter *Jessie*

Only two copies of the manuscript were ever made. One was kept by Miho Baccich while the other went to his uncle, the owner of the *Stefano*, Nikola Baccich. In 1880 Miho Baccich relocated himself from Dubrovnik to New Orleans, USA and took his manuscript with him. The manuscript was in Italian, the *lingua franca* of the day, and it was not until 1920 that it was translated into English by Miho's American wife Angelina (Cietcovich) Baccich. At that time Miho was in good health and living in New Orleans with Angelina and their large family of seven children – six daughters and one son.



(Photo: Courtesy Gustave Rathe)

The Baccich family 1918

In time each child was given a copy of the translated manuscript and the story itself became part of the family heritage.³

This is the manuscript featured in this issue of IM.

The importance and the full extent of this private manuscript only became clear in 1990 with the publication of the book, *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano off the North West Cape of Australia in 1875*, by Gustave Rathe, the grandson of Miho and Angelina Baccich.⁴



(Photo: Josko Petkovic)

Gustave Rathe in Fremantle in 1998

Rathe's first-person account of his grandfather's shipwreck follows the events described in the manuscript quite closely. Because of this and because of the affectionate tone of Rathe's narrative, his book has, to many, become the public face of his grandfather's story. Its popularity can be discerned by the fact that it can now be read in several languages.⁵ The book has been most warmly received by descendants of Baijangu and Jinigudira Aboriginal groups, who are most keen to have the fact of this story widely known. The gracious tone of Rathe's book has inspired many other artistic offshoots of the story in books, films, plays, paintings and pantomimes.

Rathe's book inspired my own interest in the *Stefano* shipwreck, in part because in the late 1990s I was involved in the establishment of the Charter of Friendship between the City of Fremantle and the Island of Korcula – the island home of the original Baccich patriarch.⁶

In Fremantle, the interest in the *Stefano* story re-surfaced in April 1997 when the *Stefano* wreck was discovered by members of the Western Australian Maritime Museum, in shallow water almost exactly at the spot described by the manuscript. In November 1998, Gustave Rathe and his son Paul came to Fremantle to examine some of the relics retrieved from the shipwreck site.



Photo: Brian Richards

Gustave Rathe (centre) with his son Paul examining the *Stefano* bell in the WA Maritime Museum, Fremantle, 1998. Also pictured are Mike McCarthy (left) and Josko Petkovic (right)

It was during Rathe's visit to Fremantle that I first met him and recorded my first interviews with him. At that time I very much wanted to learn about his grandfather and to find out how he came to write his book on the *Stefano* shipwreck. My long-term aim was to collect as many different versions of the *Stefano* story as possible and especially stories of descendants of the North West indigenous groups.

In 2000 I sought to interview as many descendants of the *Stefano* sailors as I could find. In Croatia this turned out to be surprisingly easy. In the limited time I had for this project I was able to track down all the primary descendants of the *Stefano* story.⁷ During this time I was also able to obtain a photocopy of the manuscript held in the Rijeka Maritime Museum.⁸

In the USA I was given unlimited access to all *Stefano*-related archival materials held by Gustave Rathe and a number of his immediate relatives. It was during this visit that Rathe gave me a copy of his grandmother's translation on 82 typewritten pages – the same translation he himself used as the basis for his own successful book.

My interviews with Rathe gave rise to a one-hour three-screen-video-triptych entitled *The Resurrection of the Barque Stefano: Part 1 – Shipwrecked after Sunset*. It was completed in 2001 and in it Gustave Rathe narrates how he came to write his book. During this time I was also interested in the contribution that the primary scribe of the *Stefano* manuscript, Canon Stjepan Skurla, had in the writing process. The very sacred "triptych" form of this production was a way of invoking Skurla's presence.

My interest in Skurla coincided with an interest in him from another quarter in Western Australia albeit for entirely different reasons. Not long after I met Rathe he described to me a curious group of people in Perth who very much wanted

Skurla to be the sole author of his grandfather's manuscript. The professed motives of this group were enigmatic, to say the least, as were their pronouncements. But whatever these motives were, it was also obvious that a manuscript written more than one hundred years ago by a priest without any descendants was a manuscript free for the taking.

From a filmmaker's point of view this situation was a fascinating one as it invoked ethical as well as legal concerns. It only further amplified the question I too wished to explore, namely: Just how much of an "author" of the *Stefano* manuscript was Skurla?

NOTES AND REFERENCES – AN INTRODUCTION

1. A benefit concert held for the survivors was reported in the *Inquirer*, 9 August 1876, *Supplement*. Quoted from Smoje, Neven; "Shipwrecked on the North-West Coast: The Ordeal of the Survivors of the *Stefano*", in *Early Days: Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 8, Part 2. 1978, p. 44 and Note 6.
2. Reported in the *Inquirer*, 9 August 1876, *Supplement*. Quoted in Smoje, Neven; "Shipwrecked on the North-West Coast: The Ordeal of the Survivors of the *Stefano*", in *Early Days*, Vol. 8, Part 2. 1978, p. 44 and Note 5.
3. Angelina died in 1925 and Miho went on to live for another 10 years. He died in 1935 aged 76. His descendants are many and number in the hundreds.
4. Rathe, Gustave, *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano Off the North West Cape of Australian in 1875*, (Carlisle ,WA, Hesperian Press, 1990).
5. Rathe's book has been printed in Australia, USA, Germany, Croatia, Spain and Netherlands: and in English, German, Croatian, Spanish, Catalan and Dutch. The original is in Italian and will also be available on our *Stefano* website.
6. It turns out that Fremantle has a surprisingly large number of residents from the Dalmatian region of Croatia and from the Island of Korcula in particular. In the 2007 Perth telephone directory there are 36 Baccich related names listed.
7. Most descendant were found in the same localities as their forebears were in 1876 – stretching from the Istra peninsula (descendants of Nikola Bacich, the owner of the *Stefano*) to Konavle, south of Dubrovnik where I found descendants of Brajevic. Descendants of Toma Dediol lived next door to my grandmother's home in Kuciste.
8. This is where the second of the two original copies is held today.

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[**BARQUE STEFANO SHIPWRECK WEBSITE \(NASS IM E-JOURNAL\)**](#)